

Summer Hire Perspectives – 1959-1962, Larry Brown

From an Interview with Larry Brown, December 2009

Hands-on training and the opportunity to contribute to the success of the project through new skills provided a firm foundation for a future career for one college student hired for summer work by the Bureau of Public Roads.



*Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) employees and temporaries who were working on the Peak to Peak Highway in 1959 included (standing): **Lew Lenz**, **Eric Andrews**, **Frank Baldwin**, **Leland Krebs**, **Bob Miller**, **Larry Brown**; and sitting: **Bill Miller**, Assistant P.E. **Bill White**, **Chuck Ogsbury**. Not shown: **Bob Twyford**, Project Engineer.*

Photo courtesy Larry Brown.

“You’re stuck now,” the Assistant Project Engineer told Larry Brown. “You’ll retire working for the BPR.” Larry remembered that **Bill White** “was kind of a famous guy in the BPR.” He and Project Engineer **Bob Twyford** “had been with BPR forever,” and Bill White was certain that, just as he had done, Larry would make a career at the Bureau of Public Roads.

It was the summer of 1959 and Larry had just completed his freshman year at Colorado State University. He put in a job application at the Federal Center in Denver and was hired by the office that is now the Central Federal Lands Highway Division. His first summer assignment was on a project on Colorado Highway 72, “the Peak to Peak Highway which goes from Longs Peak to Pikes Peak. (It’s a gorgeous drive,” he said, “right along the front range.”

Larry said he wasn’t studying to be an engineer, “but I sure liked it. I liked the surveying and all the associated stuff.” It didn’t take him long to figure out that “the transit man had the best job. He didn’t have to pound stakes, carry the stake bag, hold that rod, and he was crew chief.” So Larry set his sights on that job, and “before the summer was over, I was the transit man. I could set up that transit on a hillside and have it perfectly level in 20 seconds.”

The equipment they were using at that time was state of the art. “We had a Ziess self-leveling level that was brand new on the market. Three screws, and all you had to do was get it close. That was pretty high tech at the time.”



The cabin where the crew lived during the summer of 1959. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.

Recalling some of the crew members, he said **Leland Krebs** was one of those career employees who had come straight to the job without any college. “It seems like,” he said, “they had to have one of those” on every project. **Frank Baldwin** was another of the summer hires. “He was an engineering major from Laramie, Wyoming. I think he went to work for the Wyoming Department of Highways....He was a bona fide engineer....

“That first summer we lived at a resort in a summer cabin community called Peaceful Valley Resort: old, old cabins, totally overgrown in the forest. Really gorgeous.” Larry recalled that it had been built by a guy from Austria, and that he also offered horseback riding and a climbing school. “He did steak fries and hay wagon rides. He built the whole place himself, and it looked like it. It was just a hodgepodge – add-ons, add-ons, add-ons – but he was such a hard worker, that he did well.”

Like the resort, the project was located on the St. Vrain River. “We had to build a bridge across the river and it was on a compound, complex curve. It was 111.11 feet long – that’s a pretty easy number to remember.”

Before the construction of the bridge could begin, however, “they got in there stirring around all the transit points and they screwed them all up. We didn’t know where this bridge was supposed to be.” Larry remembers the crew members standing around on the rock fill, “big rocks, wondering what to do, and nobody knew what to do.” He had the transit with him, and was able to spot “two or three targets, way off in the distance. So I got the books and figured out the angle and I started wiggling the transit in on these big rocks. They were big,” he said, and it was “really difficult, but nobody even paid any attention to what I was doing. Within about an hour, though, I had the bridge.

“They said, ‘ah baloney,’ not believing I had figured it out, but it soon became clear: ‘Look here,’ they said, ‘oh, this makes sense!’ So I was the hero.”

While the crew was living there, Peaceful Valley Resort was not always peaceful. “It was a pretty wild bunch,” he said. “We all lived in one cabin with about



Construction begins for a bridge across the St. Vrain River in Peaceful Valley, Colorado. Photo Courtesy Larry Brown.

four bedrooms....We played poker 2-3 nights a week and one of those guys could sit and play poker and drink a quart of Jim Beam.” By midnight the guy would pass out, and “we'd pick him up and put him to bed. But he'd be at work on time in the morning.” Now Larry can only shake his head at that resiliency. “He was young, a 22-year-old kid.”

Another young man on the crew was hired in the early summer about the same time he was, Larry said, and he “was the son of a high level BPR person. He was a bit of a namby pamby, so we picked on him. We'd tie his bed together with strings so that when he got in it, it fell through. We short-sheeted him,” and, he admitted, they probably played other tricks on him as well. “So he complained – to his Daddy.”

The result, Larry said, was a “big investigation. They lined us up outside the office and they took us in

and they interrogated us one at a time, asking 'what did you do to this poor kid?'" No one tried to hide anything; “everybody just told them what we did.” When it was all over, “They took the kid away and left us alone. They sent him off somewhere else, which was the right thing to do, I guess. Or maybe not,” Larry mused. “He'd have probably grown up a lot that summer – if he could have withstood the hazing.”

He recalled that the guys on the BPR crew were not the only pranksters. “The gals at that resort would pack our lunch. One day we got a few egg shells in our egg sandwiches, so we complained.” After that, he said, “we got egg shells in our egg sandwiches every day!” This got old after a couple of weeks, but their complaints to the Project Engineer were brushed off.

“So one day we were out eating lunch on the job in the forest and we stole the boss's lunch, took his sandwiches, and put one of our eggshell sandwiches in it. He bit into it and yelled, 'that dang woman!’” The guys admitted to the swap: “Oop! That's one of ours; that's what we've been talking about.” The lunches soon improved.



Larry and other crew members check out the new Ziess transit. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.



The main lodge at Peaceful Valley Resort, 1959. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.

Larry returned for a second summer in 1960 and was assigned to a crew in Rocky Mountain National Park where he worked on another bridge. “There were bridges to build everywhere,” he said, admitting that he found that type of work was the most fun. The Project Engineer on this project “was **Glade Roberts**, a one-armed guy who had some notoriety as a mountain climber. There were a couple of the career guys who would commute up from Ft Collins,” and one of these was “**John Billy Dimer Reeves**, who was the asphalt man.” Other members of the crew that year included **Jim Kerr**, **Charlie Johnson**, **Jim Willis**, **Bill Hutchison**, and **Chuck Campbell**.



*Construction of the bridge near Estes Park, Colorado, in Rocky Mountain National Park, 1960.
Photos courtesy Larry Brown.*

“That summer we worked on the road to Bear Lake...probably the most popular...tourist spot” in the park, he said, with a “beautiful sub-alpine lake. We only did about three miles of the road that year.” The crew lived in a cabin within the park, and “I believe it’s still there, which is unusual,” he said, as the National Park Service has removed most of the cabins that were in the parks.

“The entrance to the park was on the Big Thompson River,” which he noted has since become “kind of a famous river. (A) huge flood—about a 400 year flood—in 1976, went down through there from Estes Park on down to Loveland, and killed 145 people. It was a huge flood; a dam broke during a major precipitation event. “I lived right on that river,” he said, adding that the entrance to the park there “no longer exists. They closed it because they wanted people to go in (at) a different place.”

Larry's final project was in Nederland, Colorado, in 1962 where he worked on a few more miles of the Peak to Peak Highway. "I'm dredging the hard drive here," he said, finally coming up with the name of the Project Engineer, **Allan "Buck" Rodgers**. "Then there was a guy that worked with me, an engineering major named **Stanley Hew Len**, and **Tom Edick**, who I believe was the Assistant Project Engineer." Other members of the crew that year included **Al Neigh, Ray Cox, Charlie Miley, Bob Anderson, Jed Edwards, and Bob Wright**.

"This last summer I spent quite a bit of time inspecting the installation of culverts and sub-drains...to drain water away from the road bed," and he recalled a nice compliment he received from the Assistant PE and future Associate Administrator of the Federal Lands Highway Program. "I've been with this (job) a few years," Tom Edick told him, "and you're one of the best workers I've had."

They lived in trailers that year, "and we ate in a restaurant there called Harlow's. It's still there, but it's not called Harlow's any more. Mrs. Harlow was a gambling addict," he remembered. She "went to the dog races every day, in Loveland, Colorado, which was a long drive, getting her back home at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m."



This cabin was "home" for the summer of 1960.

Photo courtesy Larry Brown.

Those summers provided Larry with a lot of in-depth on-the-job training. "I remember learning how to slope stake, and you had to do all the calculations in your head. Nobody had a calculator at the time, anyway. And that taught me how to multiply and divide in my head very quickly."

Each job was different, but each brought him a new view of bridge and road building. "That first year" on the Peak to Peak Highway—and on most of the jobs—"they were just improving the old road. But sometimes they would take off and go in different directions a little bit." When they did that, he said, the "experience was so total that I worked...from aerial photographs, walking around in the forest, finding points on the aerial photographs." Before they arrived, "the road was just a pipe dream," and their job was to turn it into something real, "right up to the blue tops and red tops and curbs, paving, and gutters."

Unlike many of his fellow summer employees, Larry left the BPR after graduating from college. He spent two years in the newly created Peace Corps where he was involved in a project taking bees to India. After that he spent four years teaching, and then went back to school to get a PhD in ecology. From there "I went to work for a mining company, doing reclamation," he said, observing that his BPR experience was invaluable in that job. "The major cost expenditure in reclamation is moving dirt for everything. I knew how to move dirt, survey things, build roads, and place culverts. I could do it blind-folded." When the company hit hard times, "I went out and formed a company on my own and continued to do reclamation for mines. Mostly I was just the planner and the permitting person, but sometimes I was right on the job," he said, doing work similar to what he'd done as a summer hire for the Bureau of Public Roads.



Photos at right, top: Larry Brown, Charlie Johnson, Jim Kerr, 1960. Bottom: Bill Hutchins, 1960, Estes Park. Photos courtesy Larry Brown.

Larry Brown spent his third summer working at Yellowstone National Park. His memories of that experience will be covered in a separate story in this series. Retirees who would like to share their own experiences are invited to contact me at marili.reilly@dot.gov.

